

HOW TO WRITE A POLITICAL SCIENCE PAPER

by Chiara Superti

Main sources of the presentation:

- Harvard Writing Project Brief Guide Series “A Brief Guide to the elements of Academic Essay”, by Gordon Harvey;
- Government 20 Writing Workshop Fall 2012 (Emily Clough);
- Harvard Writing Project. Gen Ed Writing Guides. WRITING IN ETHICAL REASONING 22: JUSTICE, Professor Michael Sandel, by Bettina Scholz.

Important elements:

- Before starting
- STRUCTURE:
 - INTRODUCTION
 - BODY
 - CONCLUSIONS
- WRITING and STYLE
- USING THE READINGS

First steps:

- **Understand the prompt:** What is the prompt really about? Break down the prompt and identify its components: how many questions? Do you have to address them all? What kind of evidences is asking about?
- **Map your paper:** think of the paper as a graph with the thesis at the top and various branches that represent the different pieces of evidences.

INTRODUCTION

- **Motive:**
 - why someone would/should read this paper?
 - puzzle...
 - *Note about length*
- **Thesis:**
 - This represents your argument; the claim you want to make: answer the questions and take a position
 - Clear, concise and nuanced.
 - It should be arguable and falsifiable.
 - Be precise: each word you use (in particular in the thesis needs to be unambiguous or defined immediately in the paper.
 - The totality of your argument should be summarize in the thesis; avoid making separate claims (not supported) along the paper.

BODY

- **EVIDENCES:** data (i.e. quantitative data, newspapers, textual data, experts or other authors' opinions etc..) or cases/examples or readings or logical reasoning, whatever you decide to use to support your thesis.
- Divide your arguments in parts.
- Use of paragraphs → each paragraph has a role. The paper needs to have a logical flow.

CONCLUSIONS

- Summarize your ideas → how the evidences shed light on your thesis.
- Re-state your thesis and maybe some possible consequences/implications (depending on length of work)
- Counter-arguments (if available): what are the main objections to your thesis can you defend your thesis from them?

WRITING and STYLE

- Paragraph structure: first sentence, logical order, stitching paragraphs to make the paper flow (i.e. transition words).
- Remember your thesis and find supports for all its components
- Use formal language, avoid colloquial language
- Proof-read

USING the READINGS

- Always cite → full quotations (with page number), ideas or paraphrasing.

When in doubt: Harvard Guide to Using Sources:

<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do>

[http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k70847
&pageid=icb.page355322](http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k70847&pageid=icb.page355322)

- Pay attention not to distort authors' ideas: what is the author's answer to the question?
- Avoid long quotations when the paper is short.
- Do not summarize the readings (i.e. avoid: *Author X says y....and author Z says A, B and C...and so on*) → use the ideas to inform your argument.

Example: let's use this prompt to outline a paper.

Depending on the definition of democracy, the United States can be defined as highly democratic, partially democratic or not democratic at all. The democratic principles democratic governments aspire to are often in conflict with each other at the moment of their practical implementation. What can the USA teach us about this trade-off? How democratic do you think the United States is?